

St. George Russian Orthodox Church
(The Church of The Holy Great Martyr
George the Victorious)
St. George
St. George Island
Pribilof Islands
Alaska

HABS No. AK-50

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. GEORGE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (The Church of The Holy Great Martyr George the Victorious)

HABS NO. AK-50

Location: St. George, St. George Island, Pribilof Islands, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: The Church of St. George the Victorious.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: Constructed in 1935-36, this church is one of the few buildings on the island that was not constructed by the government. Financed by the natives, the church's separate elements -- sanctuary, nave, narthex, and belltower -- are clearly expressed on the exterior. Unusual details include the ogee-arched portico, echoing the shape of the onion dome, and pointed-arched windows.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1935-36. Construction began in the summer of 1935, when carpenters named Pearson and Manderville arrived at St. George from Seattle. Pearson and a native gang worked on the church from May 15 to July 15, when Pearson was assigned to the school. Construction work continued through the winter, and demolition of the old church began on May 16, 1936.¹ The new church was consecrated May 10, 1936, according to papers found in the church.
2. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Supervised by a carpenter from Seattle named Pearson and a local man named Paul Swetzof, Sr., the church was erected by the parishioners themselves at their expense. The barrel ceiling was said to be the inspiration of a carpenter named Trutson, who worked for the U. S. government on the island. Isidor Nederazof carved the framework of the Royal Doors and the deacons' doors, and also painted the clouds on the large mural.²

The lumber was obtained from Seattle; Fr. Stephen Shabanov died there while purchasing it in 1935.³

¹ Log of the Treasury Agents, St. George, Pribilof Islands Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (on microfilm).

² The Church of St. George the Victorious, 1833-1986 (St. George Bicentennial Commission, 1986), 3.

³ The Church of St. George, 10.

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3. Original plans and constructions: The church has been little changed, as the original architectural drawings show. The elements of sanctuary, nave, narthex, belltower, and porch are all clearly expressed on the exterior. The ogee-arched doorway and pointed-arched windows are original, as is the triple barrel-arched interior. The iconostas differed slightly in the drawings, with a pronounced entasis to the pilasters.
4. Alterations and additions: The church has had few major alterations. The front doors have been replaced. The stained glass in the belltower was added in the late 1970s; the frosted glass in the nave is original. The tile wainscot in the nave was added in the mid-1960s. In the mid-1970s, the carpeting was donated by the Sisterhood; previously, the floor was painted wood, which had been unpainted originally.⁴

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

The first church on St. George was built of driftwood in 1833 by the Russian-American Company. The chapel was dedicated to the Great Martyr St. George, and was located on the site of the present church.⁵ Fr. Innocent (Veniaminov) noted its existence in 1838: "This settlement contains a wooden chapel erected in honor of St. George."⁶ No illustration of this chapel has been found.

This chapel was replaced in 1875 by a larger wood-frame structure. In 1875 the assistant treasury agent noted, "the company is building a very fine church for the natives."⁷ James C. Redpath, a carpenter, arrived at St. George on June 25, 1875, and left on October 6, 1876.⁸ Samuel Falconer, the Treasury Agent on St. George, noted the erection of "a very fine and beautiful church . . . Mr. J. C. Redpath builder and architect."⁹ The natives paid for the building materials and provided most of the labor. The church was dedicated on

⁴ Andronik Kashevarof, interview, July 12, 1989.

⁵ The Church of St. George, 1.

⁶ Bishop Innocent Veniaminov, "Zapieska ob Ostrovah Oonahlashkenskaho Otdayla," (St. Petersburg, 1840), translated by Elliott and appearing in Henry W. Elliott, The Seal Islands of Alaska (1880), reprinted in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1898) 3:241.

⁷ Samuel Falconer, Assistant Treasury Agent, to Capt. Charles Bryant, Agent in Charge of Seal Islands, August 1, 1875, in "Reports on Condition of Seal Life on the Pribilof Islands by Special Treasury Agents in Charge, and Others, from 1868 to 1895," in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1898), 1:71.

⁸ June 25, 1875, and October 6, 1876, Log of the Treasury Agent, St. George, Pribilof Islands Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (on microfilm).

⁹ Falconer to Charles Bryant, Treasury Agent on St. Paul, May 17, 1876, correspondence received by Treasury Agent on St. Paul, Pribilof Islands Collection.

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October 8, 1876.¹⁰

Located just north of the present church, the 1875 church had a gable-roofed nave, four bays long, a sanctuary in the rear, and a three-story belltower. The first level of the belltower contained the pedimented entry; the second level had bull's-eye windows; and the third level had an open belfry with a Roman dome. The belfry was replaced in the early twentieth century by one with enclosed sides. The windows in the church appear to have been double windows with flat arches. (See Early Views, III.B., below.)

Henry Elliott described the churches in 1880: "There is a large church at St. Paul and a less pretentious but very creditable structure of the same character on St. George."¹¹ Libby Beaman, who spent a couple of months on St. George in 1880, described the town and church:

There are only twenty-two Aleut families living in twenty-one white frame bungalows on a single curved street that faces onto a plaza where five or six company buildings, a little school, and a little green and gold onion-domed Orthodox church are grouped like a toy setting for a Russian fairy tale.¹²

This 1875 church stood until after the 1936 one was completed; photographs show the two buildings, side by side. (See Early Views, III.b., below.)

Like the church on St. Paul (see HABS No. AK-51), the church on St. George was completely self-sustaining. Funds for church construction came out of the sealing fund. Until 1875, St. George was served by an occasional visiting priest from Unalaska. After Fr. Paul Shisenekoff was assigned to St. Paul as a resident priest, he visited St. George on occasion. In 1882, Fr. Innokenty Lestenkof came to St. George as a resident priest, supported entirely by the community. The church was finally consecrated in 1897.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The elements of this gable-roofed church are clearly expressed on the exterior: nave, sanctuary, narthex, belltower. Unusual ornament includes gothic-arched windows and an ogee-arched opening that reflects the shape

¹⁰ October 8, 1876, Log of the Treasury Agent.

¹¹ Henry W. Elliott, The Seal Islands of Alaska (1880), in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1898) 3:29.

¹² John, 206.

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of the onion dome. On the interior, the barrel-arched ceiling is a striking and unusual feature.

2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The church measures 28'-5" x 70'-7" overall. The separate elements measure: sanctuary, 22'-4" x 15'-4"; nave, 28'-5" x 42'-8"; and narthex, 24'-4" x 12'-7".
2. Foundations: Poured concrete.
3. Walls: Clapboards painted white, with white trim.
4. Structural system, framing: light wood framing.
5. Porches: The gable-roofed portico with ogee-arched opening has a concrete floor, box columns supporting the roof, and a beaded-board ceiling.

In the south side of the belltower, there is a slight recess for a single-door entrance. This is a flat-arched entrance, with plain surrounds.

6. Chimneys: There is a concrete-block chimney at the junction of the sanctuary and the nave.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance has an ogee-arched surround and fanlight. The double doors are metal and unornamented.
 - b. Windows: The gothic-arched windows in the nave have twelve-light fixed sash and a four-light transom window. The windows in the sanctuary and belltower are also gothic-arched, but smaller, with only six lights.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Gable roofs cover the nave, sanctuary, narthex, and portico; all have wood shingles painted green.
 - b. Cornice: There is a plain, molded cornice.
 - c. Belltower: A square (13'-3" x 13'-0") belltower rises from the gable roof of the narthex. It has a pyramidal roof from which a twelve-sided drum, lit by stained glass, rises. It is crowned by a copper onion dome.

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C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave, narthex, and sanctuary are all open spaces. In the nave, the amvon is raised three steps; it has a semi-circular projection in the center and a krilos at each end. In the southwest corner of the nave, there is a warden's desk, raised one step. There is a choir loft at the west end of the nave. There is an unfinished basement, with a concrete floor and rock and concrete walls.
2. Stairways: The stairway is located in the north side of the narthex. The stairway to the loft is three-quarter, with a varnished wood wainscot. The stairway to the basement is directly underneath.
3. Flooring: The nave has wall-to-wall carpeting, while the narthex and choir loft have linoleum flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are wall board, with a wood chair rail. The wainscot has a covering of large tiles. The ceiling is a modified barrel arch, with a large semicircular arch in the center and smaller quarter-circular arches along the sides.
5. Doorways and doors: There is a double swinging door between the nave and vestibule. Varnished wood, each door has two panels.
6. Decorative features: The iconostas is white-painted wood, with engaged box columns, which divide the iconostas into seven bays. Colored light bulbs in porcelain sconces decorate both the vertical and horizontal elements of the iconostas. The royal doors have carved cut-outs and are surmounted by a carved sunburst motif in an ellipse above the transom. Above the iconostas is a painted mural of a madonna figure set on a blue background with clouds.

Four icons present in the church today were included in an 1839 inventory of the first chapel: the icons of SS. Kirik and Iulita and of St. Nicholas, which hang in the kliros to the left and right of the iconostas, and the icons of Christ the Saviour and of the Theotokos on the west wall of the nave.¹³ Other icons were purchased in the early 1880s.

At the edge of the amvon is a varnished wood balustrade. There is a lightly-molded trim around the windows, and a small cornice at the top of the wall. The choir loft has a varnished wood balustrade. There is an elaborate chandelier, purchased in 1884 for \$110 and nickel-plated in the 1930s. The belltower has five bells, inscribed: "CAST BY WILLIAM BLAKE & CO. FORMERLY H. N. HOOPER & CO. BOSTON MASS A.D. 1875."

¹³ The Church of St. George, 1.

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7. Mechanical equipment: The building is equipped with electricity. It is heated by a furnace in the basement.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Located between the industrial buildings set on the water's edge and the residential part of St. George, the church is set in a yard which has a picket fence all around, and a stone wall on two sides. The cemetery is located on a hillside on the southeast side of town. The front of the church faces west-northwest; for simplicity in this report, the front has been referred to as the west, and the altar as on the east.
2. Priest's House: Just uphill from the church is the one-and-a-half-story priest's house. Constructed of wood frame with clapboards, the building has a concrete foundation.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: Three blueprints of original drawings were found in the church. They include front and side elevations, a section of the tower, a plan of the tower at window level, a transverse section, and a partial longitudinal section.

B. Early views:

Photograph of the new and old churches, side by side, ca. 1935, Lillian P. Ordway Collection, PCA 141-20, Alaska Historical Library, Juneau.

Photograph of previous church and town, ca. 1891, 22-FFA-393, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC. This photograph is reprinted in The Church of St. George, cited below.

Watercolors of previous church by Henry W. Elliott, 1874 and 1890, 22-HE-41 and -40, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC.

- C. Interviews: Sub-deacon Andronik Kashevarof, interviewed by author, July 12, 1989.

D. Bibliography:

The Church of St. George the Victorious, 1833-1986. St. George Bicentennial Commission, 1986.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of St. George Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during the summers of 1989 and 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Raymond Todd, Andrew Feinberg, Lidiya Velichko (USSR), Alex Lashkevich (USSR), Kate Solovjova (USSR), and James Creech, architectural technicians; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who produced this report.

SAINT GEORGE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
(THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY GREAT MARTYR GEORGE THE VICTORIOUS)
Saint George Island, Pribilof Islands
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(THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY GREAT MARTYR GEORGE THE VICTORIOUS)
Saint George
Saint George Island
Pribilof Islands
Alaska

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